

# Kongo Personal Names Today: a Sketch

UNGINA NDOMA

## *Introduction*

**I**N 1972, THE ZAIRE government decided that citizens would no longer use foreign personal names brought over by the European Christian tradition. However, with the change of names one can still notice that some of the now 'authentic names' are European, borrowed and adapted to the phonology of the indigenous Zairean languages. This is particularly true for personal names in the Lower-Zaire province which was part of the well-known Kingdom of Kongo. The population of that province, the Bakongo, have been in continuous contact with Europeans since the fifteenth century. It is here that the phenomenon of integrated foreign anthroponyms—essentially Portuguese or transmitted through Portuguese—appears with the greatest vigor.<sup>1</sup> And it is the structure of these foreign anthroponyms that will be described in this paper.

## *Kongo naming system*

To understand the choice, the meaning and the range of a personal name in Zaire, the familial and social organization of the particular ethnic group must be known. This section is to show briefly how the naming system operates in the Kongo society. Although the southern subgroup of the Bakongo is the one I shall focus on, the information below is valid, *mutatis mutandis*, to all the Bakongo.

Several criteria determine the choice of a personal name among the Bakongo. Classification of names depends upon the particular approach one adopts when dealing with the problem. The society regulates the procedure for naming the child, but this is not very strict. There exist temporary as well as permanent names. The fact that the parents do not know beforehand whether their newly-born child will survive or die explains why children are at first given temporary names. These are

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<sup>1</sup> The frequency of foreign anthroponyms does vary in the Bakongo territory.

generally non-human names, such as names of animals, plants or inanimate objects. Examples are *Tadi* (stone), *Sesa* (broom), *Nti* (tree), *Nsengo* (hoe), *Tanzi* (matchet). Once the definitive name is known, the Bakongo see that an evil spell can be cast on the child. Thus, even grown-ups will not reveal their real names to a person they meet for the first time.

The temporary names which are given a few months after birth are of three types: a birth name, an ancestral name, and a baptismal or a name of individual choice. These names are given according to two criteria: one "external" and the other "internal" to the circumstances at birth.

### *Internal circumstances*

A child at birth who has some unusual physical characteristic is referred to as *muana-nkisi*: literally, "fetish-child." The name is given according to the chronology of births, i.e., whether the child is a twin or a triplet. Instances of this category of names<sup>2</sup> are:

1. NSIMBA and NZUZI: names for twins regardless of their sex. All twins are called ba-NSIMBA, i.e., "those who hold each other." The one who comes out first, NSIMBA, holds (i.e., *simba*—"to hold") the other twin who is then drawn out (*zuta*, *zutua*—"to draw"). If a woman gives birth to twins more than once, distinctive names may be given besides NSIMBA and NZUZI.

2. If the mother has triplets, the third child's name is MUANA-KATUMUA, i.e., "a child to whom no orders can be given."

3. The child born after twins is NLANDU, i.e., "to follow."

4. The child who comes out of its mother's womb with its legs first is NSUNDA, i.e., *sinda*, *sunda*, *suanda*—"to sink."

5. The one which comes out holding its head with its hand is MUKOKO, i.e., "with a hand."

6. The one coming out with its umbilical cord around its body is NZINGA, i.e., "to roll up."

### *External circumstances*

These criteria pertain to the "external" circumstances at or around

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<sup>2</sup> F. Ngoma, "L'initiation bakongo et sa signification," *Bulletin du CEPSI*, Elisabethville, no. 66 (1964), p. 46.

the time of a child's birth. For instance, the death of a family member, the dismissal of the father from his job, the threat of witchcraft, the jealousy of neighbors, etc. are all remembered in naming. Thus, a child is named MATUSONGUA ("what we have been shown") or LUMFU-ANKENDA ("have mercy on me") if the mother has waited a long time for the pregnancy.

Moreover, the child may receive the name of a parent, an ancestor, a friend or benefactor of the family or that of some great man.<sup>3</sup> Actually, some children have only this latter type of name. It is given upon agreement between both parents.

An additional name is conferred on a child after "initiation" but this is dictated by the custom and depends on the sex of the child. Initiation names for boys are, for instance, NSUMBU, LEMA, MAVAKALA, LUKAU, MATA. For girls they are LUBONDO, MABINDA, LEMBE, etc. These names have important meanings, since "initiation" in Africa is a kind of special education provided through a ceremony, the purpose of which is the socialization of the youngsters and their integration to a given social category.

In some instances, when somebody has been cured of an illness, he and his close relatives may receive a new name from the native doctor. A desparate woman who eventually conceives a child may also change her name.

The last type of name is of the child's own choice when he is grown-up. In these ways an individual may have many names all referring to his past as well as his present status.

Young people sometimes accumulate *nkumbu za kitoko*, i.e., "names of praise or pride." Many young men call themselves TUPELE, from the French, *tout près*. This insinuates that they are always near girls because they are liked by them. DELA, from the French *de la façon*, suggests a young man is a dandy, etc.

We have not mentioned thus far the Christian names that children have conferred upon themselves in church. Even the unchristened take these names. But these practices are no longer done. Later, Portuguese Christian names will be discussed, since many Bakongo now use them although it is not realized that they are of Portuguese origin.

### *Names in social context*

Although an individual may have several names, only one or two

<sup>3</sup> W. MacGaffey, *Custom and Government in the Lower-Congo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 96.

predominate. However, in some cases it is difficult to identify a person because the names by which he is commonly known may be different from those which are recorded officially.

Names among the Bakongo often correspond to roles and, as MacGaffey writes:

. . . an individual is not necessarily known by the same name to everybody. When he takes a new name and a new role he does not thereby drop other names and roles. The device permits him to do things he might not otherwise be able to do and provides for the fulfillment of roles that might otherwise remain vacant. The active assumption of such a role may cause the individual's relatives to play associated roles. Many names have no active role implications at all, and their meanings are forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

It is worthwhile to make a brief comment here about the use of names in social intercourse. Bakongo women do not change their names after marriage. Husband and wife do not call each other by their personal names. If it happens, it is only the man who calls the woman's name. Generally speaking, the husband will call his wife *nengua*, the equivalent of madam, or he will use the periphrastic construction *mama na bana*, i.e., the mother of children or *mama na —*, the dash being indicative of the name of one of their children. The wife will always call her husband *se dia* (*s'andia*). . . , i.e., the father of. . . F. Ngoma<sup>5</sup> remarks that for the Bakongo it is an honor to become a father or a mother. As soon as one becomes a father or mother, one's name is replaced by the name of the child. This usage is also sustained by the fact that the Bakongo consider it an honor if the name of a deceased person who left children is mentioned.

Sometimes close relatives do not call a child by the name he was given by his parents. This is done out of respect because *nluku kawusokololuanga ko* (one cannot joke with the name of a person when it is given to a child), i.e., the child named after a parent is identified with him and perpetuates his personality, so to speak. Thus many children will be called *papa*, *mama*, *nguankazi* (i.e., "daddy," "mommy," "uncle").

Generally, some names are given to boys alone, to girls only, or to

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>5</sup> F. Ngoma, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

both. They derive from proverbial sayings full of philosophical meanings, or they are taken to denote new experiences, often unpleasant ones. The name is not, anyhow, an indication of the descent of an individual. For various reasons, children not belonging to the same family can be given the same name.

*The stock of foreign adopted names*

The time has come to consider the names which derive from Christian surnames introduced by the Portuguese colonization and evangelization. These names were originally referred to as *santu*, i.e., saint's names. F. Ngoma mentions that this *santu* has survived only where the customs have been deeply marked by the evangelization, and that the farther one goes away from San Salvador (the capital of the ancient Kongo Kingdom, presently in Angola), the less it is attested.<sup>6</sup> Many of these surnames were borrowed from the Old and New Testament as well as from the names of the "Fathers" of the Catholic Church. These names won great popularity because they spread throughout the Kongo territory without great difficulty.

Two observations must be made in relation to the so-called saint's name:

a. Foreign names which have been borrowed, adapted phonologically and are now used as local Kongo names, come exclusively from the Portuguese.

b. Only Portuguese surnames were borrowed and, in Kikongo, became family names, although they too were formerly used as surnames by the Bakong.<sup>7</sup> However, in a few instances some Portuguese last names were also borrowed as such. But this can be explained since a Kongo child could be named after an important person.

The situation in the Kongo domain contrasts with the one in other Zaire regions. The Bapende, for instance, do not borrow proper names, but only common nouns from French. Although the Bapende are not directly related to the Bakongo, they also attach importance to what happens at or around the time of birth for the naming of their children. This is the justification for their practice of using common nouns as anthroponyms.

Consequently, both among the Bakongo and the Bapende, phonological change and semantic readjustment occur. The surnames become

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Kikongo is the language; Bakongo refers to the group of Kikongo speakers.

the last names and the common nouns become personal last names.

Following is a list of some of these names with a brief description of the types of phonological change they were subjected to.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there is no statistical evidence to demonstrate the distribution of these names among the population. The first category, according to my own classification, comprises names with the Portuguese title prefix *dom*. Its feminine equivalent *dona* is attested only—we have no contrary evidence for the time being—in the name NDONA. This was derived from *Dona Anna* and which has become NDONA by agglutination. Nowadays, Ndona is still used in Kikongo as a polite term to refer to a lady.

*Men's names*

a) *with the agglutinated prefix dom*<sup>9</sup>

Ndofula ← Dom Francisco  
Ndofunsu ← Dom Affonso  
Ndoluvualu ← Dom Alvaro  
Ndomanuele }  
Ndomanueno } Dom Manuel  
Ndomatezo ← Dom Mateus  
Ndombasi ← Dom Sebastiao  
Ndo(m)petelo ← Dom Pedro  
Ndondele ← Dom Andre  
Ndongala ← Dom Gall  
Ndongalasia ← Dom Gracia  
Ndongosi ← Dom Agostinho  
Ndosimau ← Dom Simao  
Ndo(n)toni ← Dom Antonio  
Ndozuau ← Dom Joao

b) *without prefix*

Dinizi ← Dinis  
Felela ← Ferreira  
Fuala ← Francisco  
Funsu ← Affonso

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the journal *Ngonge* (no. 1-2, Kinshasa, juin-août, 1960) where some of these names appear in Kongo proverbs, thereby showing to what extent the Kongo tradition has absorbed them.

<sup>9</sup> Morais Martins says that the use of this prefix became generalized in the seventeenth century (*Garcia de Orta*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1958, pp. 33-51).

Gama ◀ Gama  
 Gusitu ◀ Agostinho  
 Ilayi ◀ Hilario  
 Isaya ◀ Isaías  
 Kasitelo ◀ Castro  
 Kelebi ◀ Querubim  
 Luka ◀ Lucas  
 Lumingu ◀ Domingos  
 Luvualu ◀ Alvaro  
 Mboloji ◀ Ambrosio  
 Mikola ◀ Nicolau  
 Mingiedi ◀ Miguel  
 Molazi ◀ Morais  
 (Mo)ntelo ◀ Monteiro  
 Mose ◀ Moises  
 Ndualu ◀ Eduardo  
 (N)toni ◀ Antonio  
 Siliva ◀ Silva  
 Soba ◀ Sebastiao  
 Vasiko ◀ Vasco  
 Videla ◀ Videira  
 Viela ◀ Vieira

In terms of frequency, names preceded by a prefix are more widespread among the Kongo population of Zaire than those without a prefix which are more noticeable among the Bakongo of Angola. It is also the case with the names for women.

*Women's names*

Bianu ◀ Bibiana  
 Bidi ◀ Brigitta  
 Bele ◀ Isabel (Bela)  
 Beneta ◀ Benedita  
 Ditina ◀ Cristina  
 Doneta ◀ Dora ~ Dorita  
 (Elu)Melinda ◀ Ermelinda  
 (E)Milia ◀ Emilia  
 (E)Sitelela ◀ Estela, Ester  
 Fineza ◀ Ines  
 Fololinda ◀ Florinda

Kalumilia ← Camila  
Lina ← Linda  
Linda ← Linda  
Lolena ← Lorena  
Losiana ← Luciana  
Lozalina ← Rosalina  
Lozeta ← Rosita  
Melia ← Amelia  
Mimoza ← Mimosa  
Ngalasa ← Graca  
Veliana ← Valeriana  
Z(i)ovelina ← Juvelina  
Zudia ← Julia

*Some linguistic considerations*

From a purely linguistic point of view, some observations as to the morphology of the Kongo names can be made. The Kongo name is a personal substitute, the morphological integration of which is unquestionable.<sup>10</sup>

Examples: MAWETE ma NZA ——— class 5 — prefix *ma*  
KISITA ——— class 6 — prefix *ki*  
LUSAMBA ——— class 10 — prefix *lu*

It appears that the personal name behaves as a nominal since it can be determined by an adnominal syntagm<sup>11</sup> as the first example shown above. It is interesting to notice that although the names in other Kongo sub-groups often have a “filiation particle” (*dia, ya, bua, wa*, as in KINKELA di LUTETE), this particle is not exploited much in some Kongo sub-groups. Moreover, the Kongo name does not only behave as a nominal, but as a verbal and a propositional<sup>12</sup> as well:

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<sup>10</sup> Kikongo is a Bantu class language. In a class language nouns are grouped into different noun classes that are morphologically well-defined. Each noun consists of a nominal prefix and a root or stem. Generally, for each noun stem there are two corresponding noun prefixes representing the singular and plural.

<sup>11</sup> F. Lumwamu, *Essai de morphosyntaxe systématique des parlers Kongo* (Paris, 1973), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> R. Agonatanakahn, *Introduction à l'anthroponymie zairoise* (CELTA, Lubumbashi, 1974), p. 43.



A. *Nominal*

- a) simple: MANKENDA (“sadness”)
- b) compound: NKANDANGULU (“pig’s hide”)
- c) deverbial: WASANSUA (“he has been well taught”)
- d) pronominal: KIAKU (“yours”)

B. *Verbal*

ZOLA (“love”)

C. *Propositional*

KATUNANZOLAKO (“people do not like us”)

A semantic classification could be done of the names but it would be far too complex for the present discussion.

*The following phonological rules can be stated to explain the changes undergone by the adapted foreign names:*

- a) /r/ is absent from the Kikongo phonological system. Wherever there is /r/ in Portuguese, it will be realized as /l/ or /d/ in Kikongo:

r → l / — o, a, u, e  
or r → d / — i

*e.g.*

Maria ▶ Madi(a)  
Pedro ▶ Mpetelo  
Graça ▶ Ngalasa  
Alvaro ▶ Luvualu

- b) Procope is frequent: V → ∅ / # ———

*e.g.*

Agostinho ▶ Gusitu  
Antonio ▶ (N)Toni

- c) 1. Denasalization of the first vowel of a sequence and then prenasalization of the first preceding or following vowel.

*e.g.*

Antonio ▶ Ntoni  
Dom Mateus ▶ Ndomatezo

- 2. When nasalization occurs in final position, the vowel or the vowel sequence is simply denasalized.

*e.g.*

Dom Joao ► Ndozuau

d) Š → ∅ / \_\_\_\_\_ #

*e.g.*

Domingos ► Lumingu

Mateus ► Matezo

e)

C                      C

[+fric                      +fric  
+pal.-alv.] → [dent.-alv.] / # \_\_\_\_\_

*e.g.*

Julia ► Zudia

Joao ► Zuau

f) Prothesis and epenthesis

*e.g.*

Castro ► Kasitelo

Ester ► Esitelela

These two changes occur whenever in Portuguese there are clusters of the type *br, dr, fr, sk, st*, etc. In many cases the prothetic vowel is /i/.

g) Reduction of diphthongs which become monophthongized and, for reasons not yet established, shift from /n/ to /m/.

*e.g.*

Nicolau ► Mikola

### *Intimate nicknames*

The last set of names includes “intimate nicknames” given to children by their parents and used in family in lieu of their real names. Such are:

Bebe

Bibi

Coco

Dede

Didi  
 Dido  
 Dodo  
 Dudu  
 Lili  
 Lola  
 Lolo  
 Lu(lu)  
 Nene  
 Tete  
 Titi

The origin of these nicknames commonly used in Zaire is not well known. Supposedly, European French-speaking peoples do not use them. But to the contrary, some of the nicknames are used in Brazil and in Portugal. Thus, it cannot be true that these nicknames are only shortened forms of indigenous Zairean names. Their choice is determined, not by the function of a given name or surname, but only by their consonance and by the child's sex, with the exception of some names which are given indiscriminately to boys and girls, such as *Coco*, *Didi*, *Dodo*, *Dede*, *Titi*, *Nene*. This requires further investigation.

### *Conclusion*

After this quick review of the Kongo naming system, only a provisional conclusion can be drawn. Many details have been left out, but I have tried to show how the naming system is geared to socio-cultural factors. Although the Bakongo maintain their customs with regard to names, contact with western culture has left marks. Some of the names they bear today were originally extraneous to their world, but they have been assimilated so well that the average Mukongo is not aware of that fact. The change of names that the 1972 governmental decision officially initiated has given another stroke to the already shaking frame of naming customs. The purpose of this paper was merely to present the *status quaestionis* and to prompt further detailed and structured studies of Kongo anthroponymy.